

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Prepares for Hurricane Season in South Florida

Managing Lake Okeechobee for Public Safety is Top Priority

The Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, John Paul Woodley, Jr., has announced that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is highlighting its Herbert Hoover Dike safety enhancement activities as the 2006 hurricane season approaches.

"The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers holds public safety as its highest priority," said Woodley. "We have always taken, and will continue to take, actions that put protection of the public above all other considerations. That is why we have a comprehensive program to ensure the integrity of the Herbert Hoover Dike is always maintained and Lake Okeechobee water levels are managed to minimize risks as we enter each hurricane season. The Herbert Hoover Dike safety enhancement activities provide for a wide array of preventive and protective measures, including increased on-site inspections as the prospect of damaging storms increases."

Woodley further stated that he had received an April 28, 2006 letter from Florida Governor Jeb Bush, outlining concerns about Herbert Hoover Dike that were identified in a report by the state's independent review panel to study the dike's status and stability. Governor Bush's letter requests consideration of nine recommendations.

"The report prepared by the state's independent review panel confirms and validates concerns that the Corps has expressed for some time now, and which we have already begun to address" said Woodley. "The Corps provided all information requested by the independent panel to conduct their analysis."

The Herbert Hoover Dike is an earthen dam that was built with natural materials in the 1930s, according to the construction standards of the time. The dike does permit some natural seepage from Lake Okeechobee; however, in some instances, this seepage creates internal erosion of the dike, creating small, subterranean tunnels that, if undetected and unchecked, may undermine the integrity of the dike. The Corps regularly monitors for this condition and takes immediate corrective actions to prevent erosion from leading to a failure of the dike. A rehabilitation project was approved in 2000, and construction on a 4.6-mile section of the dike near Port Mayaca is currently under way. This is the first of eight sections scheduled for rehabilitation.

Further, because the Corps recognizes that the dike is more stable when the water in Lake Okeechobee is maintained between 12 and 18.5 feet, it is currently studying the possibility of revising the approved lake regulation schedule to balance estuary health, a viable lake ecosystem and water supply. Currently operating under an approved deviation to the regulation schedule, the Corps lowered the water levels to a 14-foot elevation by mid-April, well ahead of its goal to reach that level by today, May 1st. Achieving lower lake levels during the dry season helps to prevent larger and potentially more environmentally damaging releases from the lake during the rainy season and as tropical storms and hurricanes become a threat.

"The Corps welcomes independent analysis and constructive feedback, and we take the panel's recommendations and the governor's requests very seriously," said Woodley. "We will review and consider all of these recommendations very carefully, while we continue to implement all of the measures that we currently have under way as part of our Herbert Hoover Dike safety enhancement activities. We will continue to work with all parties to protect life, property and the

environment in south Florida as we contribute as partners to the management of the state's vital water resources."